

Teaching Honors 390: Bob Dylan and His Lyrics in the 1960s

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "T.M. D. Berg", with a stylized flourish at the end.

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### Abstract

As a component of our respective individual Honors theses, for the first ten weeks of the Spring 2012 semester fellow graduating senior Marc Keith and I co-taught a one credit hour Honors Colloquium on the music, lyrics and historical context of Bob Dylan. While the literary influences, historical context and stylistic development of Dylan's lyrics were a primary focus of our analysis, the classroom format allowed us access to all the media through which Dylan's art is appreciated. Though teaching the class itself was the primary component of the project, I provide in this binder the course syllabus, written and developed by Marc and I. Also included is an extensive week-to-week reflection of my experience teaching fellow students.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Timothy Berg for serving as faculty adviser on this project. Receiving permission to teach the class required the willingness of a faculty adviser willing to attend each class meeting, meaning that this seriously couldn't have been completed without him.

*Reflection on Teaching Honors 390: Bob Dylan and His Lyrics in the 1960s*

*An Honors Thesis Project*

**Course Background/Planning**

The genesis of the idea to teach a class on Bob Dylan occurred when I asked eventual co-instructor Marc Keith what sort of project he planned to carry out in fulfillment of his Honors Thesis. He responded vaguely that he may or may not want to teach a class on Russian literature. My first feeling was excitement at the prospect of signing up for the class and writing a paper about how Dostoevsky would've agreed with me that Marc's political views are silly. My second thought was to suggest that instead of him teaching a class on Russian literature the two of us instead co-teach a class on Bob Dylan, a shared interest and topic of discussion between us for several years. Marc quickly agreed to this proposal. My initial suggestion of Dylan was made in reaction to the original subject of literature, in a devil's advocate sort of way. Rock n' roll instead of boring books, man. As we thought about it more, though, we found it funny that the two subjects could ever appear in our minds as approaching antithetical. This is probably the initial reaction of many to the notion of studying popular music as an intellectual exercise. This became the earliest basic goal of our class, to instill or reinforce the idea that people can think critically about information transmitted to them from sources other than professors, classrooms or textbooks.

The most difficult part of the planning process with Marc was deciding what aspect of Bob Dylan our class would focus on. Once it was determined that the Colloquium would be worth one credit hour, meeting once a week for the first ten weeks of the Spring Semester, we decided to limit the content of the course to areas concerning

roughly the first half-decade of Dylan's career: 1962-1967. In retrospect, I probably would have expanded the content to include the entirety of Dylan's career. Also, in planning the course it may have been a mistake to be so faithful to a linear timeframe. At the time, chronology was not surprisingly the first way I thought of going about teaching somebody's life and work. I also probably felt too much pressure to thoroughly convey at least a few aspects of Dylan's work within the condensed class time. A broader approach would have yielded more material to draw from and ideas to consider, which would have been beneficiary when class discussion slowed and my notes and preparations were limited to a strict chronology.

The aforementioned decision to focus on Dylan's work from 1962-67 was made for several reasons. For one, his music during this period is what most people associate with Dylan. Marc and I didn't want any student who signed up for the class expecting to hear "Blowin' in the Wind" and "Like a Rolling Stone" to feel disappointed. Perhaps the main reason, though, was that this period encompassed the vast majority of Dylan's topical songwriting. This allowed us to bring up a host of cultural/political issues of the 1960s that we thought would be of particular interest and relevance. From the start, Marc and I (for better or worse) intended the class to be a convergence of literary and historical interests. Above all, as I mentioned earlier, we wanted people to listen to Bob Dylan. Our next goal was to demonstrate that both the artist and his work were uniquely influenced by literature and his contemporary culture. So, we tried to divide the class material and homework between these two influences: we assigned reading from a book of 1960s political primary sources and also from various poets and writers we felt were comparable to certain Dylan lyrics/writings. I think Marc and I executed this dual mission



to varying degrees of success throughout the class. I also think we failed to provide a comprehensive enough explanation of this duality to the class at the onset of the semester, which led to us having to play catch-up by reminding many of the students to touch on both literary and historical aspects in their early journals.

I will cover that problem and others extensively in the week-to-week reflection, but the final macro-issue that related to course planning involved Marc and I's relatively busy schedule. As we formulated the idea for the course in the fall, we made the mistake of only establishing a rough outline for each week's content, leaving the bulk of the week-to-week planning to be done in real time. This proved to be a mistake, as both of us found our last semester before graduation to be filled with more work and more academic apathy than we planned. This should have been foreseen and could have been remedied by increased planning in the fall from Marc and I and earlier/more frequent communication with our faculty adviser, Dr. Berg. While there were undoubtedly major areas that could have been improved on, I still personally consider the class an ambitious and often successful Thesis project.

## **Week 1**

Marc and I utilized the first week of class (Wednesday nights) as an informal introduction. We asked the students, in addition to introducing themselves, to briefly share why they signed up for a class about Bob Dylan. I don't recall exactly what I was expecting, but I was definitely surprised to learn that the vast majority of the fifteen students had little or no prior exposure to Bob Dylan's music. I think I half-expected this introductory meeting to be a comparison of personal Top Five Dylan Albums Lists. Only

one student, however, mentioned that he was such an avid listener. I was pleased to see about a fifty-fifty split of males and females, which surprised me a little. The most common rationale for signing up for the course was that it seemed like the most interesting option, and at least a few were waiting for an Honors Course about music of some sort.

The rest of the class was spent quickly summarizing the syllabus, and perhaps too quickly explaining how grades would be broken down and homework assigned/submitted. Because Marc and I assigned both reading and listening components each week, this made it a bit more confusing than a normal class. Additionally, we made sure all of the reading and listening assignments were available online. The songs were almost all readily available via a YouTube or Google search, and we found an online copy of our textbook of primary sources, *The Times Were a-Changin': The Sixties Reader*. Not only did the online version mean the students wouldn't have to buy anything for the class, we felt it was the perfect introductory cultural/political complement to Dylan's music of the period, consisting of primary sources each with a brief one to two page background by the editors. Of course, as part of the course hoped to demonstrate Dylan's cultural impact, the title was a plus.

Overall, Marc and I wanted to keep the first class meeting informal and brief, both to show solidarity with our fellow students enrolled in the course and to ease in without overwhelming our considerable nerves. Our faculty adviser Dr. Berg, who would be present throughout each class period, suggested after class that we might have lightened the mood and set a better tone by having some of Dylan's music playing as the students walked in. This would have been a good idea, and highlighted our need for better

communication with our faculty adviser, who was thankfully a big Bob Dylan fan himself.

## **Week 2**

Over the course of planning for our first normal class period, Marc and I decided to begin each hour-and-fifteen-minute class period by showing a relevant fifteen to twenty minute excerpt from Martin Scorsese's Bob Dylan documentary *No Direction Home*. As we reviewed our schedule planning we realized we were probably both subconsciously influenced by the documentary in selecting some of the course material, which I don't think was necessarily a bad thing. I think showing a movie clip first each week was effective in generating discussion beyond the assigned reading/listening, which was helpful in the event that the homework wasn't understood or particularly enjoyed. We also enjoyed the freedom of adjusting when we showed the selected clip. Some weeks we started with a discussion that transitioned nicely into the documentary.

For this class meeting, we had students listen to the major influence of Dylan's early songwriting, Woody Guthrie. The songs covered themes of anti-fascism, the blues of Dust Bowl migrants, and the moral ambiguity of bank robbery, as well as Guthrie's well known but often misinterpreted "This Land is Your Land." Other listening homework included his only two authored songs from his debut album *Bob Dylan*. One of these was called "Song to Woody," while the other directly references a line from Guthrie's "Pretty Boy Floyd," which we also listened to. We hoped the students would at least observe the obvious nods to Guthrie, but maybe even catch the distinct lyrical, musical and structural influences of Woody in Bob's early music. Remembering our

larger goal for the class, to show that one could think critically about popular music, we hoped students would simply observe that songwriters, like poets or novelists, are influenced by those that precede them. This might seem obvious, but I can definitely remember being oblivious to it. We also had the students read from the online textbook an excerpt from Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, which perceived a plight of the poor in post-World War II America that was going unnoticed. Marc and I's intention here was to instill in the students a sense that Dylan in this Woody Guthrie stage perhaps had an opportunity to seize on some of the same themes addressed in Guthrie's lyrics from previous decades.

Getting away from my idealistic vision, I believe the class itself went pretty well. The documentary reinforced Dylan's Guthrie connection and brought up the notion of Dylan's search for a musical/lyrical identity—a topic we would discuss throughout the semester. In the discussion, I was surprised to find that many of the students thoroughly enjoyed the Woody Guthrie songs. Several really appreciated Guthrie's persistent reminders of ambiguity. This made me optimistic knowing we would eventually listen to Dylan songs that were similarly structured. Again this may seem simple, but just the acknowledgement that relatively popular music lyrics utilize literary devices and themes, beyond just rhyming, was something Marc and I wanted the students to take away from the course.

Also of note this week we listened to the assigned Dylan song, "Who Killed Davey Moore?" in class at the request of a few students who wanted a second listen. The song, which isn't found on a Dylan album, laments the 1963 death of boxer Davey Moore. While the song played, Marc and I pulled up a link to a newspaper article

discussing the tragedy. I think this was effective in reinforcing our point about the cultural influences on Dylan's songwriting and the exceedingly topical nature of some of his early songs (and Guthrie's as well).

### **Week 3**

For this week we had the class read John Lewis's 1963 speech from the March on Washington and listen to three early Dylan songs that dealt explicitly with Civil Rights. We also emailed the students a link to an audio collection of African American Civil Rights music, asking them to contemplate the similarities/differences. In lieu of the Scorsese documentary, we played for the class Dylan's performances, solo and with Joan Baez, at the March on Washington. We also played Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" and "The Times They Are a-Changin'" in class, perhaps his two most well known topical/protest songs. Marc and I neglected to include these in the syllabus, not considering how many potential students would be completely unfamiliar with Dylan's music at all.

I think class discussion flowed pretty well this week. In addition to the more manifest issues of race and class called for by the Dylan songs and Civil Rights movement, the class had an interesting discussion about Dylan seizing on the Civil Rights movement in order to shape his emerging identity as a musician/songwriter. The issue of a white kid in his early 20s edifying on the injustices of racial inequality was definitely something Marc and I hoped to touch on through our inclusion of the African American Civil Rights music and John Lewis's subversive speech. Though he was officially prohibited from speaking during the class, our faculty adviser Dr. Berg briefly noted

Dylan's Jewish roots, and thus potential to speak from a minority experience. This was a good point and a good segue back to discussion of Dylan's identity. It also allowed Marc and I to expound on Dylan's real name, Robert Zimmerman, and some interesting stories surrounding this.

Although I felt discussion went well this week, there were also several periods of silence that were particularly enlightening as one of the people responsible for teaching the course. As a student I experienced myriad classroom silences in my academic career, be they the result of apathy, ignorance or the Middle Ages, but it's a wholly different experience when you're the teacher. I guess I wasn't fully prepared for the realization that when there was a silence in my class it was my fault. "My fault" may be dramatic and not entirely true, but that's definitely how I felt. I think the fact that I was a student teaching other students played into this. If you're an actual professor, you have your relative position in society to fall back during classroom silences. And I guess the authority to at least question the silence itself, which isn't something Marc and I would've been comfortable doing even had our preparation been as thorough as possible. It was definitely a humbling experience that you don't think much about when you're just one of a class full of silent students.

#### **Week 4**

We devoted this week's class to Dylan's connection with the turbulent politics of the 1960s outside of the Civil Rights movement we covered last week. We had students prepare for this by listening to Dylan's "Masters of War" and "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues" which castigate war profiteering and lampoon reckless anticommunism,

respectively. Marc and I felt the two songs would be an interesting contrast as they both comment explicitly on political attitudes of the time period but do so in different ways, demonstrating Dylan's versatility as a songwriter. In class, discussion of these differences took an interesting turn toward their similarities. Instead of communicating in a calculated, textbook tone, both the blind rage of "Masters of War" and the playful mocking of "Paranoid Blues" represent real human emotional responses to the Cuban Missile Crisis/Vietnam War era. Both songs on one level elicit the emotional responses of anger and laughter, and on another level speak to the pervading insecurity of the period, especially for Dylan's young, idealistic generation.

Talking about these issues in class this week made me feel like we scored somewhat of a victory for teaching history through this alternative method of topical songwriting. The history itself is interesting, but Marc and I felt like at least a few of the students connected more to its urgency by seeing a glimpse of it through the eyes of a songwriter who was their age as it was happening. Marc and I hoped the reminder that Dylan was writing and performing these songs in his early 20s would make the students think about how they would've reacted to the same frightening circumstances. Prior to class, the students also read Dylan's poem/short fiction piece "Go Away You Bomb," which led to a discussion of the difference between Dylan through the media of song and print. We also thought the poem was a cool glimpse into a young dude pondering nuclear annihilation.

Also this week we probably too briefly touched on Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" and the assigned poem "Wichita Vortex Sutra" by Allen Ginsberg. We also discussed the fairness of Dylan's association with political agendas/movements of the

60s. This was a discussion we would continue at various points throughout the semester. Many people casually aware of Dylan, as the students were prior to the class, associate him with his more overtly political songs. I initially hoped the course material and discussion would challenge if not dispel this association. In retrospect I'm afraid the period of songs we chose, as well as our focus on historical context, might have unintentionally reinforced a misguided or at least incomplete view of Dylan as the "Voice of a Generation." I still believe the focus on the context of the 60s was valid, but the condensed nature of the class just made it impossible for us to additionally place the topical songs in the context of Dylan's entire songwriting career.

It turned out that the link we emailed the class to "Wichita Vortex Sutra" was to an incomplete excerpt of the long Ginsberg poem. I hoped to discuss and compare Ginsberg's explicit references to politicians and the Vietnam War, but the excerpt the students read did not include these and was instead a ramble about sex that at least was a more accurate sample of the poet. Assigning the wrong text was a good lesson on the importance of preparedness and we didn't have much time anyway to talk about the poem and its interesting method of composition, during which Ginsberg utilized a tape recorder Dylan bought for him. The documentary clip for the week, however, did contain a clip of Ginsberg speaking to the importance of "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," which was a good connection between homework assignments.

## **Week 5**

Though we touched on it a little bit last week with "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall," the theme for this week's class was Dylan's transition from topical songwriting to



writing songs with more obscure lyrics. Marc and I definitely wanted to discuss the implications of this for Dylan as a person, and we knew that would be a topic of interest for the class going forward. This week in class, though, we wanted to try and keep the discussion on Dylan as an artist by focusing on the lyrics themselves. In a way, we wanted this class to be more of a traditional English class in which students explicated a text. Not only do I consider Dylan's lyrics worthy of such an exercise, but a thorough analysis of song lyrics and their literary merit just isn't done often enough and I thought this might be interesting at least in its novelty. I saw a highly regarded American poetry anthology once that included the text of a Bob Dylan song and his biography as a poet. I thought this was great even if the editor took the easy road by picking "Desolation Row," the song that directly references Eliot and Pound. A minor tangent, but it was a precedent for our class.

After talking to each other and with Dr. Berg, Marc and I decided to use what seemed to be the most common method for discussing difficult literature in a large group—breaking up first into smaller groups. For homework, we assigned several poems by the French poets Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine. We printed off extra copies of these poems as well as the lyrics to Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man," which we decided to focus on, feeling it contained at least a few easily observable connections to the poetry. We split the class into about five groups of three and gave them a list of questions to consider. The essence of the discussion was to be the similarities between Dylan's poem and the French Symbolist poetry.

The small groups met for about twenty minutes and proved effective not only in improving the quality of discussion/ensuring everyone had something to say, but also

admittedly in allowing Marc and I time to better prepare our thoughts. I think the discussion went very well, probably the best it has been so far. I was worried that without the historical context to fall back on as in previous weeks, discussion of only the Dylan songs themselves might leave the students without a lot to say. I think they enjoyed it though in part because it was a change of pace. And also hopefully just because the poems and songs were interesting! Again, the condensed nature of the class influenced my thought process in assigning the French poets. I found poems that were short, for one, and more obviously similar to Dylan because I intended to convey the ideas that Dylan's lyrics were influenced by poetry and poetic themselves apart from the music. At the time, I thought that might also be good background for a discussion about the relationship between music and poetry, something that was covered in the essay we assigned for this week by Kenneth Rexroth on the 1960s, "The Making of the Counterculture." In the article, Rexroth weaves together the social and artistic movements of the decade—something Marc and I often attempted to do through Dylan.

We left out that cultural discussion during class this week, intending to talk a lot about the Rexroth article only if discussion stalled on the poetry. The poetry discussion was a success, with the class pointing out all of the major connections. Essentially, that both "Mr. Tambourine Man" and the poems we read were interested in sensory awareness (the nature aspect of this is particularly easy to see in the poems/lyrics), the creative process and perhaps how the former can be involved in the latter. "Chimes of Freedom," another Dylan song we assigned this week, also focuses heavily on the senses, which was acknowledged by a student during class.

Another thought we had students consider in their small groups was the evolution of Dylan's songwriting as seen through comparing "Mr. Tambourine Man" to the first Dylan song we listened to, "Song to Woody." It's possible to read and even listen to the songs as miniature manifestos of Dylan's artistic outlook at different points of time. From "Hey, hey Woody Guthrie" to "Hey Mr. Tambourine Man," the two songs articulate the evolution of Dylan's songwriting influences from a political songwriting role model/forerunner to a more introspective vision or muse associated with complex thoughts and lyrics. I first saw this connection in a book somewhere so I can't take credit, and I might actually argue against this interpretation sometimes, but in that time and space of the class it was a good reference that the class picked up quickly. That connection effectively framed the point Marc and I were trying to get across for this week, which is something we should have made a better effort to do each week. At least one student wrote his or her midterm paper connecting the two Dylan songs.

## **Week 6**

Marc and I roughly planned for weeks five, six and seven to cover various aspects of Dylan's transition away from the topical songwriting that, fairly or unfairly, embody for many people his first three albums. Again, I'd like to point out that in hindsight, I'm not sure we did the most effective job of proportionally representing Dylan's early songwriting. Because we focused on critical/cultural reception, our coverage may have regrettably reinforced what I feel to be misperceptions. We wanted to teach a class about Bob Dylan, but our planning ambitiously sought to make the class about something more than Bob Dylan. It was this almost subliminal shift that I feel made the course content

difficult to follow and connect together at times. We would have been better served either narrowing the focus to Bob Dylan and his lyrics or spending more time planning and articulating a broader agenda.

Last week we primarily covered Dylan's lyrical evolution from what he called "finger-pointing songs" into the more visceral, surreal, complex and personal lyrics that would predominate his lyrics in the mid-60s (although he might never have dared assign a noun four adjectives). For this week (6) we wanted to be sure and discuss the musical transition that was just as contemporarily jarring, if not more so, than the lyrical. During the week leading up to this class we had the students listen to a plugged-in Dylan for the first time, as well as some Chuck Berry songs. Coming off last week's discussion of direct literary influences, the students picked up Chuck Berry's musical influence quickly in our class discussion. We also continued the discussion of literary influences, assigning and discussing excerpts from Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs that we felt were particularly appropriate for Dylan songs like this week's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and last week's "It's Alright Ma." I felt like our discussion of the Burroughs selection and my dilettantish description of his cut-up technique and stream-of-conscious writing might have helped them better appreciate the lyrics. This is another area in which I should have solicited more advice from our faculty adviser. Explaining art is hard.

The documentary clip this week expounded on Dylan's lyrical and musical transition. The one benefit of including so much non-Dylan material in the homework is that Marc and I felt there were so many connections to be made, both by design and by luck/subjective interpretation, that I'd like to believe the students were able to make many connections on their own. Kerouac's *The Subterraneans*, Dylan's explicit mention

of Kerouac in the documentary, Dylan's song "Subterranean Homesick Blues" (which appropriates a riff from Chuck Berry's assigned "Too Much Monkey Business") are obviously connected. I'm not positive we discussed outright any of these connections in class, but sometimes it's fun to make them on your own and they were made in many of the students' journals. The relationship between music and lyrics is another massive topic that we might have approached with better preparation or chosen to sacrifice. We briefly discussed the history of oral poetry (Homer) and how the inventions of the printing press and other media affect and bias our interpretation of certain works. I think the connection between oral poetry or even Shakespearean plays written to be performed, and modern rock concerts would be an awesome class by itself. Every idea that comes up in a class of course doesn't need to be thoroughly analyzed, though, so in a way I'm just happy some cool ideas came up.

The discussion of Dylan's musical transition was severely limited by our lack of knowledge about musical arrangements, etc. Some students, however, made very interesting and enlightening comments throughout the course on aspects of Dylan's music, which is something I hoped would happen.

## **Week 7**

For our third week essentially covering Dylan's songwriting/musical transition over the mid 1960s, we decided to focus on the critical reception of this transition. In retrospect, it's possible that Marc and I spent too much time on this transition at the expense of so many other interesting aspects of Dylan's career; however, I think we successfully expanded the discussion at several points to the phenomenon of critical

reception itself and its palpable presence throughout Dylan's career. This week, for example, we broke our generally chronological listening schedule by assigning Dylan's "My Back Pages," backtracking to include it with "Ballad of a Thin Man" and "Desolation Row" as songs that at least on some level deal with Dylan's relationship with critics/fans/the media.

Marc and I intended to make the subject of Dylan's relationship with the time period in which he lived a focal point of the class, as it's something we felt was so unique to his artistic contribution. We discussed this issue in various ways throughout the semester, but prior to this week it seemed the class reached a general consensus in support of Dylan as an artist against critics who denounced his apparent lack of political responsibility as he transitioned away from protest songs. Not taking one side or another, Marc and I sought to supplement the other side by having the class read the poem "Children of Our Era" by Wislawa Szymborska and an excerpt from *The Life of Poetry* by Muriel Rukeyser. Both of these represent a belief that poetry can be capable of, if not responsible for, communicating important social and political ideas of the context in which it is written. We also read "An Open Letter to Bob Dylan," written by Irwin Sibling and published in the folk music magazine which published Dylan's early lyrics, that Marc and I felt effectively summarized the anti-Dylan sentiment within the folk music community over the course of his artistic transition in the mid 60s.

While I generally agreed with the class in finding the political nitpicking of a twenty-something year old songwriter's music to be mind numbing at times, I often wonder if this opinion isn't at least partially influenced by an American culture often takes political responsibility for granted. Regardless, both Marc and I wanted to be sure

that multiple sides of all our debates throughout the semester were presented. During class we viewed a particularly interesting excerpt of the Scorsese documentary that involves the infamous, often chimerical stories about Dylan “plugging-in” and playing electric guitar with a rock n’ roll band at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965. This clip discussed aspects of Dylan’s musical/lyrical transition the class had talked about for the past three weeks. We also watched about ten minutes of Dylan’s famous 1965 press conference in San Francisco. I think, or at least hope that watching Dylan’s frustration with the media in the question-and-answer session gave the students another look at the disconnectedness between the two.

## **Week 8**

This week, Marc and I wanted to do something to better frame Dylan’s relationship with sociopolitical issues within the context of his entire career. We returned to reading assignments from the book of 1960s primary sources, but this time for a different reason. We had the class read two excerpts from the book with explicit Dylan connections. One was an account of the Youth International Party (Yippies), specifically their involvement in the 1968 Democratic Convention riots in Chicago. The account contained multiple references to protesters singing Dylan songs like “Blowin’ in the Wind.” The other was the 1969 manifesto of the Weathermen (or Weather Underground), the radical offshoot of the Students for a Democratic Society that advocated and conducted violence against the U.S. government. Not only is their “Weathermen” name purported to originate in the Dylan lyric, “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows,” the introduction to their manifesto read by the class included a line from “Maggie’s Farm,” another Dylan song.

We wanted the class to read these two sections for their obvious connections. Both the Yippies and Weathermen were ostensibly groups of radical young people who became associated with violence that resulted in tragic casualties. The important thing that we wanted the class to notice, however, is that both political organizations were formed and functioned at least five years after Dylan had written any overtly political songs. In fact, by these events in the late 1960s Dylan had even transitioned away from his post-folk electric blues period and, to the public's curiosity, released a biblically influenced acoustic album (*John Wesley Harding*) in 1967 and a country western album (*Nashville Skyline*) in 1969.

Like last week, our class discussion this week focused on disconnectedness, this time not between Dylan and certain media/critics, but between Dylan and political organizations that co-opted his music and lyrics to advance controversial positions. As well as listening to what we felt were a couple representative songs from both *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*, we assigned several more love songs or generally personal or humorous songs from earlier albums we had discussed mainly for their political or lyrical importance. I hoped that doing this, and mentioned so in class, would allow the students to see the misrepresentation mentioned above that I think often occurs with Dylan's music. With so much focus on politics and heavy literature, the simple love songs can be overlooked, which is ironic because they will probably prove to be his most enduring.

To end class, in lieu of the documentary, we showed a few humorous clips of a guy named A.J. Weberman who claimed to study "Dylanology." In the mid-60s, he was about Dylan's age and used to dig through his trashcans and write books about, among



other things, the subliminal demonic messages in Dylan's lyrics. I should say Marc, the class, and I found it humorous, but Dylan himself seemed pretty mad in his confrontations with the Dylanologist. We intended to let the class leave early before Spring Break, but we stayed the full time and laughed about the Dylanology stuff, which I count as one of the better experiences in teaching a class of fellow students.

## **Week 9**

Marc and I left the last two weeks on the syllabus open, intending to see if the students wanted to discuss any aspects/songs of Dylan's that we may have missed or covered too briefly. After talking with Dr. Berg, he agreed that this might be a good week to listen to music from the rest of Dylan's career as part of a more informal class meeting during which we would also field any questions from students about final their projects. We also planned to reserve the final week (week 10) for the presentation of final projects or papers, which I will talk about in depth in my summary of next week. Dr. Berg generously brought in his collection of what I think was Dylan's entire discography, and Marc and I selected on the fly a few interesting or representative songs from some notable albums. The class definitely found Dylan's Christian period in the late 70s a little interesting given our focus on his earlier music. One of the coolest things about Dylan in my mind is that he is still making songs unlike any he has before, continually reinforcing his versatility and musical genius. I hope that listening to some of his more recent work—we listened to at least three songs from 1997's *Time Out of Mind* and a few from 2006's *Modern Times* and 2009's *Together Through Life*—encouraged some in the class to consider listening to this newer music and other periods of Dylan's career we missed.

## Week 10 – Final Presentations

For their final grade, we gave the class the option of writing a six to eight page paper over a Bob Dylan album of their choice or completing an alternative creative project they were to clear with Marc and I before beginning. For the research paper, we decided to make the use of outside sources optional. On one hand, we felt it would be an interesting experience to examine the surprising amount of scholarly articles/essays/books available on Dylan and his work. We didn't want to make outside sources a requirement, however, because it seemed too academic and we wanted to leave open the option of a completely subjective exploration and interpretation of an album.

About half the class chose to write a paper and, while most ended up drawing from at least one source, the two papers done without sources did not in my opinion suffer in quality. It was cool to see traces of class discussions in many of the papers. A couple students took the opportunity to discuss albums from periods of Dylan's career we did not cover in class. One listened to and wrote about 1970's *New Morning* and another chose 2006's *Modern Times*. Marc and I asked the students who wrote papers to share an informal review of the albums they listened to, our hope being that this might further encourage some students to listen to more music we weren't able to fit into the class. Additionally, I enjoyed that most, if not all, of the papers took us up on our suggestion to consider in the paper how the songs on a chosen album work together to create a unified work. One student emailed me after to say that listening to an album in its entirety wasn't something they had done since buying CDs as a kid. This was an unintended benefit, but I have always thought modern music consumption makes the subtleties of a thoughtful grouping of songs a lost art.

The creative project option was inspired by Marc and I's own experiences with the Honors College, having each completed several creative projects over the course of our time at Ball State. For a class like this, where discussion stalled during more than a few class periods for a variety of reasons, I felt like the creative projects helped redeem my hope that the students appreciated the unique subject matter of the course, if nothing else. One student utilized his background in graphic design and created an electronic infographic of Dylan's *Bringing It All Back Home* album cover. Individual details of the album's cover art were blown up and provided with explanatory paragraphs, explaining their presence in the picture. For example, the woman lying on the couch behind Dylan was his manager's wife, and on a mantle behind a fireplace is an album of 1950s performer Lord Buckley. Many of these details are not apparent to the naked eye. I was unaware of nearly all of them and especially appreciated the Lord Buckley observation, as I didn't know much about him at the time. Its presence in the infographic was the impetus to my becoming a big fan. I imagine this happens to professors sometimes, but it's not something you're usually aware of as a student—you could potentially inspire a teacher. In addition to being aesthetically impressive, this presentation in particular utilized a contextual method of understanding Dylan's work that Marc and I sought to do frequently during the semester.

One student wrote a premature obituary of Dylan, while one donned dark sunglasses and held a mock press conference in the style of his combative and elusive interviews we watched in class. Another student even carved a series of images onto a curved wooden stick. When you twisted the stick around in your hands, the pictures each represented in order a phrase from Dylan's fast-moving song "Subterranean Homesick

Blues.” This was obviously a cool project that very effectively achieved what I think was our goal in assigning the project. Basically, see if you can connect Bob Dylan to something relevant enough to you that you actually want to see the connection through (or at least not won’t mind seeing it through). As a student who was rarely motivated by school for the sake of school, I appreciated seeing the diversity of the creative projects. I’ve written extensive research papers that I can’t remember a word of, but can’t begin to count the number of times a small laugh has or moment of unprovoked interest has changed the way I look at things. The creative projects and also the final papers really validated for me the whole idea of co-teaching a course as my Honors Thesis.

### **Grading Journals**

I thought it would be best to reserve a unified section to discuss grading the 250-500 word journals that the students turned in every week in which students were instructed to react to and connect their assigned reading and listening. Grading journals was by far the worst part of this experience. This was due in large part to the obvious fact that I was a student grading the work of other students, but also I think to the particularly subjective nature of discussing music. As a result, I tried my best in grading the journals to be focused on the rubric-style requirements we explained to the students and as clear as possible in my comments I included with each grade. The actual assigning of grades became much more bearable as I perceived a marked increase in the quality of journals each week. Marc and I rotated which half of the class’s journals we would respectively grade each week in order to rectify any personal biases or tendencies. The first few weeks

we sent the journals with our grades and comments to our adviser Dr. Berg, who then gave us the approval to start sending the grades back without his review.

The major problem with grading was the same with planning—an unforeseen buildup of work in both Marc and I's last semester of classes. This rendered grading less of a priority than it should have been, which along with a lack of week-to-week preparation were my biggest regrets. When I think about the students who volunteered to take such an experimental class, making it possible in the first place, only to have some of their thoughtful weekly considerations not considered to the best of my ability, it makes me especially regretful. It is a feeling that I will certainly take with me and rectify if I am ever in a similar position.

There was only one incident over the semester in which a student took issue with a grade they received. After the first two or three journals, the student felt that they did not understand our grading scale or expectations for the journals. In my opinion, this was the result of a combination of miscommunication and misunderstanding on everyone's part. The disagreement was perhaps the product of our focus on grading certain criteria: did the student mention each of the assignments, did they compare the music, did they connect the music to any historical context, etc. The student may have felt our grading implied an issue with his subjective thoughts/interpretations, something I tried to be careful not to do. Regardless, the issue was resolved and the student's journals and overall class contribution improved dramatically as a result of our dialogue. Dr. Berg also served as a mediating influence during this disagreement, something we greatly appreciated given the unique circumstances.

## **Final Thoughts**

Rather than rehash any regrets or successes, I would just like to take the opportunity to thank Ball State University and the Honors College for providing the unique environment necessary for a learning opportunity such as this. To teach fellow undergraduate students about Bob Dylan in a real class is something that I appreciate more every day and certainly couldn't have imagined as a freshman that couldn't get his roommate past Bob Dylan's voice. The specifics detailed in this summary are trivial compared with the overall life experience this provided.

Of course I'd like to thank again Marc Keith, Dr. Tim Berg, and all the students who took the course.

## HONORS 390: Bob Dylan and his lyrics in the 1960s

Instructors:

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### Course Description

This course will look at the relationship between Bob Dylan and the culture of the 1960s, with a particular focus on how this relationship is manifested through his lyrics. How do Dylan's lyrics influence our perception of the historical events they describe? How does our knowledge of the history behind the songs affect our listening experience? What role does an artist play in developing history? Do artists have a responsibility to their historical circumstances? These are just a few of the questions we will explore through Dylan's influences, both literary and historical.

Special Concerns: If you need course adaptations or accommodations because of a disability, if you have emergency medical information to share with me, or if you need special arrangements in case the building must be evacuated, please make an appointment with me as soon as possible. The information you need to contact me is given at the top of the first page of this syllabus. If you need to request an accommodation, you must visit the Disabled Student Development Office, Student Center 307, 287-5293 before I am allowed to make that accommodation.

### Assignments

Weekly Readings and Listening Assignments- Students will be required to read a number of selections, as well as listen to select songs each week. Readings will come either from our online textbook or will be posted to blackboard or emailed out ahead of time.

Weekly Journal- Each week students will respond to the assigned reading/listening material in a journal of 250-500 words. This journal should examine the issues and themes discussed in class, not simply reflect your opinion on the material. Basic questions to ask in the journals would be: How do the lyrics relate to the readings for the week? What is the relationship between the different songs for that week? How have Dylan's lyrics changed? How does the music affect the lyrics (reading vs. listening) etc. (65%)

Short Paper- You will write a 2-3 page extended journal examining one Dylan song of your choice (does not have to be on syllabus) and its historical/literary influences and its relation to other Dylan songs. (10%)

Final Project- Examine an artist outside Bob Dylan and their literary/historical impact. More specific information will be provided later. (25%)

The Writing Center: The Writing Center is where students, faculty, and staff at Ball State turn for writing support. Since 1966, we have helped thousands of Ball State writers through free one-to-one feedback sessions, workshops, presentations, writing communities, and online resources for writers. If you are working on a writing project and are looking for individualized feedback, consider making an appointment for a free one-to-one tutoring session. Students may meet for tutoring in Robert Bell 291 or online for their sessions. Phone: 285-8387. Email: [writing@bsu.edu](mailto:writing@bsu.edu).

### Policies

Attendance- As this is only a ten week class, attendance is crucial. Any more than two unexcused absences will result in a grade deduction. Chronic tardiness will also have a negative impact on your grade, so please talk to one of us if you are going have a problem arriving on time.

Technology- The use of laptops during class is allowed. Much of our material will be coming from the internet, so be sure to either print copies of the readings out or bring a laptop to view them during class. The use of other technologies, such as cell phones, will not be permitted during class.

Academic Dishonesty: You are expected to uphold the highest standards of academic honesty. Please refer to Section VII and other applicable sections of the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities for information about what constitutes academic dishonesty. If you have questions about whether something is academic dishonesty, please consult with your instructors.

### Schedule

1/12: Introduction, etc.

**1/19**

Read: Excerpt from *Bound for Glory* by Woody Guthrie, *Last Thoughts on Woody Guthrie* by Bob Dylan, *TTWC* pgs. 13-21

Listen: "This Land is Your Land," "All You Fascists," "Pretty Boy Floyd," "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" by Woody Guthrie; "Song to Woody," "Talkin' New York," "Who Killed Davey Moore?" by Bob Dylan

**1/26**

Read: *TTWC* pgs. 89-92, 98-110; John Lewis's speech from the March on Washington

Listen: "Oxford Town," "Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll," "Only a Pawn in Their Game" by Bob Dylan; African American Civil Rights music

**2/3**



Read: *TTWC* pgs. 183-200; Excerpt from "Wichita Vortex Sutra" by Allen Ginsberg; "Go Away You Bomb" by Bob Dylan, Excerpt from Dylan interview with Studs Terkel

Listen: "Masters of War," "Talking John Birch Paranoid Blues," "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" by Bob Dylan

**2/10**

Read: "Lightning," "Sensation" by Arthur Rimbaud; "Correspondences" by Charles Baudelaire; "Poetic Art," "Out Walking" by Paul Verlaine; Excerpt from "The Making of the Counterculture" by Kenneth Rexroth

Listen: "Chimes of Freedom," "Mr. Tambourine Man," "It's Alright Ma" by Bob Dylan; "Mr. Tambourine Man" by The Byrds

**2/17**

Read: Excerpts from *The Subterraneans* by Jack Kerouac and *Interzone* by William S. Burroughs; Liner Notes to *Bringing it All Back Home*; "The Vandals took the Handles" from *Tarantula*; Relationship between music/lyrics

Listen: "Subterranean Homesick Blues," "Maggie's Farm," "Like a Rolling Stone," "Tombstone Blues" by Bob Dylan; "Too Much Monkey Business," "Roll Over Beethoven" by Chuck Berry

**2/24**

Read: "An Open Letter to Bob Dylan" by Irwin Silber; Excerpts from Dylan interview with John Cohen and Happy Traum; Liner Notes from *Highway 61 Revisited*; "Children of Our Era" by Wislawa Szymborska; From *The Life of Poetry* by Muriel Rukeyser

Listen: "My Back Pages," "Ballad of a Thin Man," "Desolation Row," by Bob Dylan

**3/1**

Read: *TTWC* 64-73, 215-220, 249-259

Listen: Various songs from throughout early albums, *John Wesley Harding* and *Nashville Skyline*

**SPRING BREAK 3/4 to 3/11**

**3/15**

TBA

**3/22**

TBA